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In Interview, Education Secretary Cites Need for Improvement in College Completion and Cost Control

By KELLY FIELD

President Obama's goal of putting the United States atop all countries in college-completion rates by 2020 is "ambitious" but attainable, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said Thursday in an interview with *The Chronicle*.

"This is the moon shot," he said, "and this country has always risen to a challenge."

In a wide-ranging, 30-minute conversation, the secretary said that he would use his "bully pulpit" to press colleges to rein in spiraling tuition but that the real pressure will come from consumers, rather than the government.

"Families have more options, and they're going to shop," he said. "Parents and students will vote with their feet."

On the topic of accountability, Mr. Duncan said he would push for better measures of institutional quality to be used in the accreditation process.

He said the government would work with states to develop systems for tracking students through college and into the work force but would not attempt to create a federal tracking system. And he said the department would support colleges that adopt measures of student learning but would not require the adoption of specific standards nationwide.

College Completion and Community Colleges

While many higher-education leaders have welcomed the president's college-completion goals, some experts say the 2020 time frame is unrealistic given the nation's demographic realities. America's population growth is projected to be among the highest of developed countries, with the biggest jumps expected among minority groups who have long been underrepresented in higher education.

At the same time, traditional college-age populations are set to fall in European countries, in Japan, and elsewhere. That means it will be much easier for those countries to maintain or improve the proportion of their residents with degrees.

In yesterday's interview, the secretary said he was undaunted by these statistics.

“I hear the concerns, I hear the trends, but this is about child by child, student by student, adult by adult, people understanding how critical it is to get that degree,” he said. “I worry less about macro demographic trends than really looking every student in the eye and saying, This is what you need to be successful.”

He acknowledged, however, that “it’s going to take a lot of hard work to get there.”

“Lots of people just assume we already have the highest percent” of college graduates in the world, he said. “I think the public doesn’t understand the extent to which other countries have passed us by.”

Mr. Duncan said the president’s call for every American to have “a year or more of education” is “a minimum” threshold, and emphasized that the goal applies to both high-school students and adults. He said community colleges will play a key role in helping the nation reach that goal.

“Community colleges have been an undervalued resource,” he said, “We’ve made a major play” in that area. ... There’s a chance to have many more people graduate.”

The secretary said he chose a community-college chancellor—Martha J. Kanter, of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District—as his under secretary “to send a signal of how critical community colleges are.”

“I didn’t do that by accident,” he said. “That was strategic.”

Describing meeting with community-college presidents in Iowa and Florida who have adapted their course offerings to meet employers’ changing needs, Mr. Duncan said community colleges needed to remain “on the cutting edge” of work-force trends. A college in Iowa, he said, has started to help build parts for windmills, and an institution in Miami has created programs to train people for jobs in the fashion industry there.

“Community colleges have to be nimble,” he said.

College Costs

Yesterday’s interview came a week after President Obama delivered a nationally televised speech in which he took colleges to task over tuition growth and challenged state and college leaders “to put affordability front and center.”

“Colleges and universities have a responsibility to control spiraling costs,” the president said. “And that will require hard choices about where to save and where to spend.”

In the interview, Mr. Duncan said his department would “shine the spotlight” on colleges that are taking steps to control costs, while taking a “hard look” at institutions that aren’t doing enough. But he also expressed confidence that the marketplace would “self-correct,” and noted that universities are already beginning to talk about ways they might rein in costs, such as by offering three-year bachelor’s degrees and eliminating campus frills.

Asked about the federal government's role in making college more affordable, the secretary highlighted the president's plan to make Pell Grants an entitlement and index the maximum award to the Consumer Price Index plus one percentage point.

The Pell Grant program already operates as a quasi-entitlement, in that all students who qualify for a grant receive one. But financing is set through the annual appropriations process, and spending levels fluctuate based on politics and the economy.

Putting the program on autopilot would ensure that the maximum award increases each year and would slow the erosion of the grant's purchasing power. But it would not make the maximum award any more predictable for families, since changes in the Consumer Price Index vary widely, based on economic conditions.

Still, Mr. Duncan said that tying the maximum award to inflation "would keep the grant in sync with reality—what people pay for groceries, gas, and other things."

He argued that providing students, at early ages, with a guarantee that the program would never be cut would bear "dividends that are impossible to measure."

"If you can look at every third, fourth, and fifth grader and tell them that if they work hard, the money will be there, the psychological impact will be extraordinary," he said.

He also said the government needed to do more to reward colleges that take steps to become more affordable. President Obama has called for setting aside a portion of the money for the Perkins Loan program for institutions that control costs and increase need-based aid. The Perkins Loan program provides low-interest loans to financially needy students through a risk-sharing agreement between the federal government and colleges.

"We haven't historically played a big enough role in incentivizing behavior," he said.

Asked if he would consider providing direct federal operating aid to institutions that serve large numbers of low-income students, an idea that some college leaders have suggested as a way to help pay for efforts to improve retention and graduation rates, Mr. Duncan was noncommittal.

"That's not something we've focused on," he said.

But, he added, "to have these conversations is important."

Sara Hebel contributed to this article.